

something to the schoolhouse called a kaleidoscope, and when I looked through it, a bunch of colors swirled around. That's what the dragonflies' wings made me think of.

It was nice and cool under the tree, and I felt like I could've fallen asleep right there. *Dang flies*, I thought. *That was crazy*. Now that I'd nailed that stranger's picture to the tree, he couldn't get to me. There were probably some words to go with that spell but I didn't know them. I closed my eyes and stretched my feet out in the cool dirt. Sweet sassafras drifted on the air.

"Hoodoo."

I jumped up, wide awake.

"Who's there?" I called to the air. It was quiet for a minute, except for the sound of a boat in the distance, chugging its horn.

"Hoodoo," the voice called again.

I pushed myself up on my elbows, looking left, then right. I couldn't tell if it was a man's or a woman's voice, but it was kind of high and reedy. Hair rose on the back of my neck. I looked around. It was quiet for a minute, and then a black shape swooped down from the tree in a flutter of feathers. It was a crow, a big one, with eyes as black as the devil's. Leaves and twigs fell onto my head.

"Caw! Caw!" the crow squawked. "Don't fear me, child."

I blinked and jumped back, then swallowed. "How do you . . . how can you talk?"

The bird buried its beak in its blue-black feathers. "Danger

comin', Hoodoo. I was sent by your daddy. From the crossroads. He's stuck."

"My daddy? What do you mean, 'stuck'? What crossroads?"

"The crossroads, boy," the crow said, like I was supposed to know what it was talking about. "You gotta set something right for him, or he can't pass on."

"How can you talk?" I asked again, not even believing I was talking to a bird that knew my name. And then I remembered Mrs. Snuff's words: *Search for the black crow . . . Beware the Stranger*.

"I'm a spirit, boy," the crow said. "From the other side."

"A spirit?"

The crow stuck its beak in the wet dirt. When it came back up, a fat worm dangled at the end of it.

"What am I supposed to do?" I asked.

"There's a bad man in town," the crow said. "A demon. He's dead and alive at the same time. If you don't stop him, he'll bring terror and darkness on your people." It gulped down the worm. I had a vision of the dead man rising out of his pine box. *Mandragore. The One That Did the Deed*.

I thought I was going to be sick. A dark cloud passed over the sun. My arms got cold all of a sudden.

"So what's my daddy want me to do?"

"Ack!" the crow screamed. "You gots to kill him, Hoodoo."

"Who?"

"The bad man," the crow squawked. "The Stranger."